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SUBJECT: PANAMA: AMBASSADOR VISITS THE DARIEN

Classified By: Ambassador Barbara J. Stephenson for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (SBU) The Ambassador and several members of her Country Team visited the Darien province March 10-11. During the first day of her visit she received a briefing on the security situation from Director of the National Frontier Service (SENAFRONT) Frank Abrego and met with Darien Governor Juan Carlos Brin and other local GOP officials. On the second day she visited a number of USG funded sites in the company of a group of Panamanian reporters and gave an interview on a local VOA-affiliated radio station.

¶2. (C) The trip revealed the existence of two Dariens: an economically active Darien with basic public services in villages along the Pan-American Highway and a much more isolated and poor Darien along the various river valleys. Throughout the trip the Ambassador met with people who were very favorably disposed to the U.S. and eager for greater U.S. engagement with the region. It was clear that the work of various USG-funded activities (Peace Corps, USAID and USDA-APHIS for the most part) in the region had played a key role in developing this goodwill, and that a significant USG supported network already exists in the region to serve as a foundation for future USG engagement in the Darien. Local leaders highlighted access to clean drinking water as the most important problem in the region, together with poor quality education, and the difficulty of transportation. Based on the results of this trip, the Embassy will form a Darien Working Group to bring all the agencies with experience in the Darien together to work on a strategy for improving governance in the Darien to reduce its vulnerability to the FARC and other Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTOs). End Summary.

A Tale of Two Dariens

¶3. (SBU) The Ambassador's trip to the Darien highlighted the importance of transportation links in the Darien. Long associated with impenetrable jungle, part of the Darien has been dramatically transformed by the completion of the Pan-American Highway from Meteti down to the village of Yaviza in the last 5 years. As the Embassy motorcade drove up

and down the road there were clear signs of government presence and economic activity everywhere. SENAFRONT police officers had small bases and checkpoints up and down the road, while the SENAFRONT Regional Headquarters in Meteti was fairly well equipped, thanks in part to ongoing NAS and SOUTHCOM funded improvements and equipment. There were numerous small government offices, schools, health clinics, power stations, and a functioning transportation system (greatly improved thanks to the new USAID-funded bus station in Meteti). There was not running water, however, as this continues to be a major problem in all areas of the Darien. While many of the houses along the road were extremely poor, often consisting of a few wood planks slapped together, there were also clear signs of economic activity, including numerous cattle ranches, stores and roadside restaurants. In many ways the "Darien of the road" looked like a time capsule of rural Panama 50 years ago, rather than an impenetrable jungle province. This is no doubt good news, but it is far from being the whole story.

14. (C) While the road is one of the most heavily populated parts of the Darien, there is another Darien - the "Darien of the rivers". South of Meteti there are almost no roads except for the highway and a few short roads branching off of it, and two isolated roads on the Pacific coast. In the rest of the Darien south of Meteti, rivers serve as the primary transportation routes, and most people live on or near rivers or the sea. The Ambassador experienced this as she traveled from the Provincial capital of La Palma to Meteti by boat. In the Darien of the rivers, transportation is very difficult, frequently requiring trips in dugout canoes and subject to tides and seasonal changes in river levels. SENAFRONT Director Abrego explained to the Ambassador that the SENAFRONT presence in these areas was negligible, limited to a few garrisons in isolated towns. He described plans to create mobile units that could establish a periodic SENAFRONT presence in these areas, but acknowledged that fully implementing his plan would require significantly more equipment than SENAFRONT now has. Various people during the trip commented on the problems in the education system in the isolated villages on the rivers. Most teachers in the Darien are from other areas of Panama, and the difficulty in accessing the villages, together with the cultural isolation of living in indigenous Embera-Wounaan villages where Spanish is not the dominant language, leads to very high rates of teacher absences and poor professional performance. Governor Brin told the Ambassador that the single greatest need in the Darien of the rivers was clean drinking water. While the governor and Ministry of Health officials showed the Ambassador a well equipped local hospital in La Palma, most people living away from the road would have great difficulty reaching this or any of the other hospitals and health clinics in the Darien, or even a phone, in the event of an emergency. Clearly, there are two very different realities in the Darien, and the areas most effected by the presence of DTOs and the FARC are all in the isolated riverine areas of the Darien.

Significant USG Presence, Positive Image

15. (C) Everywhere the Ambassador stopped she was greeted with great enthusiasm. The Grand Cacique of the Embera-Wounaan, Betanio Chiquidama (Note: The traditional leader of the two "autonomous" Embera-Wounaan areas within the Darien. The traditional government of these areas has no budget and no real governmental power, but tremendous moral authority among the Embera-Wounaan. End Note), called on the USG to take a more active role in the Darien in support of the security and sustainable development of the region at a signing ceremony at the USAID-partner Darien Forestry School in Canglon. At a meeting with Embera women at a local farm the women asked the Ambassador for help building a bridge to link them to an adjacent town. The farm itself benefits from the success the U.S.-Panamanian Commission for the Eradication of Screwworm (COPEG) has had in eradicating this devastating pest from Panama (Note: COPEG is a bi-national

commission, 90% financed by the USDA to the tune of \$172 million since 1997, to eliminate screwworm from Panama and then maintain an effective biological barrier against the disease in the Darien Gap, thus protecting Central America, Mexico, and the U.S. The program maintains an important network of partner farms and inspection stations throughout the Darien. End Note) At another COPEG-partner farm the owner explained to the Ambassador how COPEG's work had made it possible to profitably raise cattle for meat and milk in a region where they used to wither and die due to screwworm. The users of the USAID-funded bus terminal in Meteti that the Ambassador visited were also deeply appreciative of U.S. assistance. The Ambassador visited two sites where Peace Corps volunteers had been living and working for several years, including the Foundation for Darien Children that has a nutritional program in almost every school in the Darien.

¶16. (C) The Peace Corps volunteers had clearly established deep ties to the Darienites with whom they lived and worked, creating a significant reserve of goodwill towards the U.S., and faith in the USG's ability to bring effective programs to the Darien that could have a significant effect on the lives of people. Another significant source of goodwill toward the USG is COPEG which has changed the reality in much of the Darien by virtually eradicating a disease that had devastated the region, and then having stayed to create a large and highly effective network of inspection stations to keep the area free of screwworm. Clearly, USDA/COPEG, together with USAID and Peace Corps, have created a solid foundation of trust on which future USG programs in the Darien can build.

Opening the Eyes of the Press

¶17. (C) Press coverage of the visit has been positive, highlighting USG investments in the region. In her radio interview the Ambassador talked about the USG programs in the region, and our commitment to the Darien's sustainable development. The journalists commented to EmbOffs their surprise at the sophistication of the Darienites, and the economic potential of the region.

The Way Forward

¶18. (C) Moving forward on our engagement in the Darien, Post will seek to focus on the Darien of the rivers. It is in these isolated areas of the Darien that small communities are facing the challenges posed by encroaching DTOs and the FARC. They receive few services from the central government beyond unmotivated teachers, broken water systems, and distant health care. Their children are being recruited to work for

the DTOs or the FARC, who also buy consciousness by paying above market rates for food and supplies to local merchants. FARC political operatives work to undermine faith in the central government's control of the area amidst an almost complete absence of Panamanian security forces.

¶19. (C) Post proposes to confront this challenge through a "whole of government" strategy. We believe the key to securing the GOP's control of the Darien region is to form a broad alliance of local groups, the various levels of Panamanian government, local and international NGOs, and International Organizations. The Ambassador's trip to the Darien made clear that there are many groups working in the Darien, but there is not a lot of coordination among them. Post plans to start by forming a Darien Working Group within the Embassy to pull in all the USG agencies that have experience in the Darien to draw up an accurate picture of what the needs are, what the existing resources are, and what our experience in the area can teach us. Following up on a request from Chiquidama, Post will then work with the Embera to encourage greater coordination of efforts among host government, NGOs, International Organizations and other donors on what is being done in the Darien, what needs to be done, and how we can work together to strengthen local

society, and the host government's provision of services. A key to this strategy will be allowing local groups to take the lead in calling for greater coordination, while then using the weight of the USG to give the initiative momentum by agreeing to present various USG programs for broad consultation among this group.

¶10. (C) A greater coordination of efforts in the Darien to provide effective access to clean water, to improve the quality of education and health care can make a real difference in the perception of those living in this remote area can tip the scales against those who would benefit from its isolation and hopelessness. Together with a program of increasing SENAFRONT's capabilities, this can turn the Darien into an inhospitable environment for DTOs and the FARC.

STEPHENSON